



WestminsterResearch

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

Grenfell Fire: an indictment of government

Bowie, Duncan

This is an author's accepted manuscript of an article published in the Chartist 287, 19, 8 July 2017. The final definitive version is available online at:

<http://www.chartist.org.uk/5702-2/>

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

Whilst further distribution of specific materials from within this archive is forbidden, you may freely distribute the URL of WestminsterResearch: (<http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/>).

In case of abuse or copyright appearing without permission e-mail repository@westminster.ac.uk

Grenfell Tower fire as a consequence of the failure of government

One of the key functions of the state is to protect its citizens. Understandably much of the debate in the General Election focused on protection of citizens from terrorists. This was perhaps understandable given the series of terrorist attacks, but this diverted attention from the no less important duty of the state to ensure a safe, secure and decent quality of life for all its citizens. An inferno in a publicly owned housing block which housed lower income households represents an acute failure of government at all levels. As the facts of the case are subject to a major enquiry and new information is emerging on an hourly basis, and as we still do not know whether the death toll is 20 or 100, it is difficult to write in an informed and rational manner and premature to attribute blame. Thousands of words have already been written in the press. Residents who have lost their homes and possessions and in many cases their relatives and friends are justified in their anger and the need to seek justice and redress. It is unlikely that we will see any of the parties involved admitting responsibility for the disaster and certainly the case for demonstrating gross negligence in terms of a corporate manslaughter charge will be doubt be subject to legal disputes for many months and possibly many years to come.

What is evident however is that for several decades no government has focused sufficiently on the need to provide good quality, safe and secure homes for lower income households. So far as Governments have considered housing at all, the focus has been on market led supply for prospective homeowners. Only in recent months, in the last Government's Housing White Paper, did we see any recognition of the need for additional rented housing. While it should be acknowledged that the last Labour Government invested in the Decent Homes programme for improving existing council housing, it is perhaps open to question whether the focus of this programme was correct, given that the programme did not apparently give sufficient attention to protection from fire. In recent years, we have seen an emphasis on redeveloping estates to provide high density flats for the private market, rather than improving the homes of council tenants and leaseholders who live there – a programme driven mainly by the needs to maximise asset values rather than any assessment of the relative housing needs of different groups.

Government policy has been increasingly to leave decisions on housing provision and the maintenance and improvement of existing housing to local councils. Some councils transferred their stock to housing associations; others set up 'arms length' housing organisations to manage their stock. The separation of the management of the stock from the local authority's statutory housing and homelessness duties was in fact promoted by the Labour government. I never understood the logic of this proposition. It weakened the local authority's ability to deliver its statutory responsibilities, while at the same time leaving confusion, at least in terms of the perspective of tenants, as to the division of responsibilities between the owner of the housing (the local authority) and the managing body. Elected councillors could offload responsibility by referring complainants to the managing organisation – something many councillors were relieved to be able to do. It is perhaps ironic that in Kensington and Chelsea, the Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) was actually constituted as a Tenant Management Organisation (TMO) but appears not to have been led by the tenants in terms of providing an adequate response to the concerns of the tenants living in

Grenfell Tower. This raises major concerns, some of which are not new, about the accountability structures within such organisations.

There are clear concerns as to the nature of refurbishment programmes and the conflict between competing objectives. The refurbishment programme for Grenfell Tower and for similar blocks in other boroughs does not appear to be primarily about upgrading the facilities and securing the structure of the block. Cladding was justified in terms of increasing energy efficiency but also in terms of improving the external appearance of the block a common practice for 1970's concrete blocks which were appearing worn. There is clearly a question as to whether cladding actually compromised the soundness of the original structure of the block and there is considerable expert advice that this was the case, notably in terms of the combustibility of the material used. A number of expert reports have argued for revising the Building Regulations, notably following the report of the inquiry into the Lakanal fire in Southwark. The fact that that fire was eight years ago and building regulations have still not been updated demonstrates the complete failure of Government to learn the lessons from previous disasters and take speedy corrective action. To learn that the US banned use of certain cladding materials in 2012 and the manufacturer of panels sells two version on panels, one more combustible than the other, so the building company and council chose the cheaper more combustible version (if this actually correct) demonstrates firstly that we need tougher building regulations and secondly that issues of cost and energy efficiency are perhaps secondary to issues of basic health and safety, which is supposed to be a central objective of building regulations. Concerns about the approach to refurbishment are not new – not only did the Grenfell residents raise concerns, as did members of the TMO board and individual councillors, but it appears that the London Fire Brigade actually wrote all boroughs as recently as April advising them of their concerns on the use of cladding panels. There are no doubt other councils undertaking checks, but why was this no done after the Lakanal fire?

The fire is rightly raising the issue of why build tower blocks at all. After the Ronan Point disaster in 1968 , and following changes in the subsidy system, councils generally stopped building high rise. Having families living in social housing above the fifth floor was actually a measure of deprivation with the national index of multiple deprivation which generated additional central government funding for local authorities. Many councils in the 1970's and 1980's, notably in East London, had programmes of demolishing towers and rehousing the tenants in low and middle rise housing. Other councils moved families out of upper floors and relets flats to singles under ' hard to let' schemes. Kensington and Chelsea however kept some of its high rise blocks and in fact Grenfell was started in 1972 completed in 1974 – 6 years after the Ronan Point explosion. In some cases blocks were modified to include concierge schemes to seek to improve management and security.

However, in recent years, successive Mayors and many boroughs, have encouraged the development of new high rise residential blocks, primarily for the home ownership market, though in some cases primarily for the investment market rather than for occupation – the argument being that safety standards are now improved and that home owners are less likely to case management problems than tenants – that problems with tower block living were primarily related to occupants rather than the structures. Interestingly the current Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, like his

predecessors an enthusiast for densification, is currently considering reviewing the density policy which in theory seeks to constrain over-development (though in practice it has failed to do so), to allow schemes with higher densities, and has published a research report considering the impact of density on quality of life and residents perceptions. Previous fires and other ‘ incidents’ such as a helicopter crashing into the Vauxhall Tower, have not led to any review of Mayoral policy on high rise buildings, policy in the past being solely driven by the relationship of high rise buildings to views of or from historic locations. Perhaps this time the lesson will be learnt : We must stop wrapping existing towers in flammable plastic by making it illegal; We should stop giving planning consent to high rise developments which are not compliant with planning policy on density, affordable housing and bedroom size mix. We should rehouse all families, all elderly people and other vulnerable people into lower rise housing – we did this in many councils in the 1980’s and if we build more lower rise affordable homes, we can do it again.

Duncan Bowie

Senior lecturer in planning and housing

University of Westminster